baptist churches of new zealand
te hāhi iriiri o aotearoa

HOW TO LEAVE YOUR PASTORATE WELL

Adapted from an article by Kim Peters

INTRODUCTION

Accidental goodbyes create accidents.
Leaving well requires planning well.
Hopefully, here are some simple ways to plan your leaving well.

THE PAINFUL PARADOX OF LEAVING

The moment you announce you're leaving, a painful paradox emerges. You have left before you've left. What do I mean by this?

You haven't left, but you're now treated as if you have. Meetings are being held without you. You're no longer consulted. You're no longer kept in the loop. You're no longer important to the future of your church. You haven't left, but you feel like you have. You park your car in a space someone else will soon occupy. You go to your office, your desk, your chair, that is only yours now on a countdown timer. Your mind and heart leaves more and more as each day passes. You're putting meetings on the calendar you know you'll not be part of. You somehow still have to 'be present' in the tasks you increasingly care less about.

In the light of this paradox, there is a measure of wisdom in keeping the leaving phase short and sweet. Six months of leaving time may be much too long. Two to three months would allow for enough time for you and your church to leave well. An exception to this principle is when you're handing over the reins to a person within your church. In such a case the transition may be from six months to two years.

GIVE YOUR CONGREGATION TIME TO GRIEVE

As a pastor, you've had the privilege of sharing people's spiritual journeys through the big markers in their lives in many ways. Every wedding, funeral, baptism, family celebration, sermon, hospital visit, and counsel has deepened the investment of your relationship with them. Now that you're leaving, grief on both sides is inevitable. Shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance, are all likely to shift off the page of a counselling manual and become the faces of your people! While this is happening, you and those close to you will have your own grief to work through, too. So, leaving will be complicated, surprising, and draining.

What to do? Give yourself and your congregation time to grieve. If you have served more than ten years, or had a time of significant trauma during your ministry you and your family may find attending a debriefing retreat helpful. Talk with your elders about how this might be financed. It may even be part of your farewell package.

A word of caution here. Be particularly careful about voicing past hurts as they bubble up from your own grief. You don't want to undo a whole lot of goodwill just because someone did something hurtful to you five years ago. When you feel the anger of grief bubbling up, take it to God in prayer before you add it in to your farewell speech! Shut the door quietly.

GIVE YOUR STAFF A GOOD DEAL

Remember that while you're leaving, the rest of your team probably isn't. So part of your final weeks can be well spent helping the rest of the team with any tasks that lighten their load. This is important for a few reasons. When you leave, their workload will inevitably increase so giving them a reprieve before that happens is a kindness to them. Your staff will also have their last memories of you helping them. This will open the door for you to return in days ahead, and also to set the tone for the day when they will leave.

MAKE A LIST OF PEOPLE TO SAY GOODBYE TO

Who hears first carries weight.

Best practise is to let the elders and staff know first that you're leaving. Next, let the whole church know at the same time through an email, so you 'catch' the most of your congregation at the same time. The Sunday service is no longer the best arena to make that announcement as probably less than 60% of the church will be present. Work with the elders/staff to identify who needs to say goodbye to you, and who might need extra care in the weeks after you have left.

Then make a list of all the people you want to say goodbye to in a more personal way. Ask yourself, "Is it best to have them over for a meal, invite them out for a coffee, write a hand-written letter, card, phone call?" Consider too if a small gift of appreciation is appropriate to acknowledge the ongoing support they've given you.

Recognise that people are likely to want to honour you and may want to bless you with farewell gifts. This may feel uncomfortable for you but letting people say a good goodbye is part of the care you give your congregation.

Here's the thing. 'No goodbye' can be the strongest goodbye of all, at worst carrying with it the power of invalidating an entire past relationship. A well planned goodbye has the power of gathering together all the rich investment of the past relationship by honouring their time with you.

EXIT INTERVIEW

Done well, an exit interview gives the church and the pastor leaving it the opportunity to process your leaving well. If your church has not thought of doing this, ask for it. If your church leadership does not have the skills to do the task well, ask your Regional Leader to recommend someone.

Below is a template you may choose to follow.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

1. Information from the exit interview may be used to improve the church's methods, practices or procedures if agreed by both parties to be of benefit for church members or personnel.
2. The questions are helpful to promote discussion and prayer.
3. Nothing will be written down by the interviewer during or after the interview.
4. All things discussed will remain confidential to the time of the exiting pastor and the interviewer.

QUESTIONS

1. What has been your most significant achievement during your time with this church?
2. What are your reasons for leaving this church?
3. What advice would you like to give to:
    a. the holders of real power within this church?
    b. your replacement?
    c. other leaders?
4. In what ways has this congregation been better off because of your time with it?
5. What important goals have you not achieved? What got in the way?
6. What things would you liked to have done better?
7. What skills and abilities do you have now that you did not have when you began here?
8. What pastor skills and abilities do you think are needed for the church's next season?
9. In what ways could the church have looked after you and your family better?
10. If the church initiated this termination, what are your feelings about it?
11. If you initiated this termination, how well are you managing it?
12. Are you 'leaving well'? Consider yourself, members of your family and church family. Consider who and how to say goodbye and the order to do it in. Consider any unresolved tensions that need reconciling or thank you acknowledgements that need to be made.
13. Do you have any other things you would like to add?

MONEY

In all likelihood you worked more hours than you actually got paid for. And in all likelihood this was recognised for most or at least some of the time! But here's the thing. Even acknowledging the solid effort you've put in feelings can run strong on both sides when the final financial tidy-up is being done. Your eldership and finance team may view your entitlements differently. Upon examination, some entitlements may just be guidelines only, and to your surprise may not even be written into your call document.

This is the kind of messiness that when combined with a downturn in offerings coinciding with your leaving can lead to unexpected disappointment on both sides. It's important to discuss and where possible agree on everything before you leave: final pay, leave payments and transfer of entitlements to the next church (where applicable). If there are any concerns about the church's ability to pay out money you are owed talk to the Regional Leader as early as possible.

Remember, you've left well when you get invited back in years to come..

YOU'RE NOT
THE ONLY ONE LEAVING

You're leaving your church, but you are not the only one. If you have a spouse and younger children who are also part of the church, they too will have to go through the painful process of saying goodbye to their friends, and begin making new friends all over again somewhere else. As much as you may want for your older children to go with you, allow them to make up their own mind.

You have a responsibility to care for not just your church in your leaving, but for your family as well. Ask them what leaving is like for them. Be aware of the ways they're being impacted throughout the transition and take active steps to soften the hurt. You won't make it pain-free, but showing you care makes all the difference.

PREACH IN PREPARATION

The Bible is rich in examples of people addressing their spiritual family before leaving.

Jacob (Genesis 47:29-49:33), Moses (Deuteronomy 31) Joshua (Joshua 23-24), Samuel (1 Samuel 12), David (1 Chronicals 28-29), Paul (Acts 20:18-38), and Jesus (John 14).

These passages and others provide a wealth of guidance in how to announce and possibly preach about your departure, comfort those you leave behind, encourage them in the future they face in your absence, and how to pray for them for their time ahead. These verses also show that you're not 'the bad guy/girl' for leaving but leaving is a normal part of pilgrimage in following Jesus.

BY INVITATION ONLY

One of the best and last gifts we give a congregation is leaving cleanly and well. If you are struggling with leaving, which is not unusual, make sure you seek help from your supervisor, spiritual director or Regional Leader.

Be cautious when you are invited to return to the church to take weddings or funerals. Ideally, this should be done only with the invitation or at least the approval of the current pastor or leadership team.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

So far we have considered some of the important relational things to work through. Here are some practical matters that will also need to be attended to:

- Write a letter of resignation with a definite date.
- Inform the Baptist National Support Centre of your leaving.
- Plan with your leadership team a farewell event, and carefully consider who to invite, including key people from neighbouring churches, schools, local council and so on. Think carefully about the day and time of your farewell, as 10am on a Sunday morning is the worst time to invite pastors and leaders from other churches to attend.
- Tidy up paperwork: annual leave, sabbatical fund, superannuation fund, holiday and final pay.
- Hand in keys, files, laptop, phone etc. as appropriate. It's ok to ask if you can keep the church laptop if it's over three years old, but it is up to the church to decide.
- Set up an email auto-reply with a forwarding email address.
- Pass on/unsubscribe from organisations and newsletters as appropriate.
- Write down and pass on all your church institutional knowledge: pin numbers, processes, and network contacts.
- If appropriate arrange a hand-over time with the person taking over your position.
- Don't expect to have a voice into choosing your replacement. You can let the leadership team know the kind of leadership you think would be good for the church in its next season, but that's about it.
- As a formal 'Officer of the Church' attend to legal hand-over requirements of Charity Commission documents, bank account signatories, IRD access and any other signatories.
- Remove your name from the website, signage, newsletter and templates.
- Notify anyone who emails you regularly of your leaving, and who now to contact.
- Don't hang on to church property that has sort of over time 'become' your own.
- Remove all your personal goods from your office and church property.
- Let the leadership team know what church resources are stored in cupboards/church grounds.
- Clarify with leadership what things you're happy to continue loaning or gift/sell to the church.
- Leave your office tidy and empty.
- Leave your forwarding email address and phone number with clear boundaries as to their use.
- If applicable, leave the manse clean and empty, with the outside lawns and garden done as well.
- Have a long coffee and think "Is there anything else I need to do here?"

REMIND YOURSELF
OF A FEW THINGS ONCE YOU HAVE LEFT

Remind yourself that your local church is no longer your church. It belongs to Jesus, not you. Remind yourself that your authority in that church completely ceases as you drive out the carpark on your last day. Remind yourself that the church leadership in the interim, and in time, the new pastor now has the responsibility to get things done. Remind yourself this authority extends even to undoing some of the things you did! Remind yourself, that you do not have the mandate to sit in judgment over the church from hereon in, even when your vast years of experience tell you what they should be doing.

Simply put you've had your time and now you are free of it. Let it go.
In simple joy get on with what God has for you now.

God bless you as you seek to leave your pastorate well.

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